

**Statement by**  
**Former Senior Correspondent, TIME Magazine**  
**Dr. David Aikman to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China**  
**July 24, 2003**

**CHINA'S APPROACH TO RELIGION DURING THE HU JINTAO ERA**

Political change, even in a country like China that has a one-party political system, often raises hopes for change in many other areas of society. Whether the issue is environmental policies, foreign affairs, or education, people often assume that a new leader will bring new perspectives to old problems. But in the case of China, the elevation of Hu Jintao to General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and to the highest state office offers little immediate promise that the approach of the Chinese government to religious practice will change.

Hu, believed to be from a family with strong Buddhist leanings, was at one time responsible for the implementation of Communist policy in Tibet. During his years there, it became apparent that the priority of China's leaders was to maintain the primacy of Han Chinese political control and to prevent the emergence of any Tibetan groups that might articulate Tibetan national and religious aspirations. Whether then or later, Hu seems to have become acquainted with Mr. Ye Xiaowen, since the early 1990's the director of China's Religious Affairs Bureau, later renamed the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). Mr. Ye, a self-professed atheist and committed Communist, has demonstrated throughout his leadership of RAB/SARA a commitment to vigorous implementation of China's religious policies at the grass-roots level. Ye has expressed the opinion, for example, that Christianity has been growing "too fast" in some parts of China, and at different times he has tried to insert his own opinions of Protestant theological issues into the administration of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), China's officially approved agency for the implementation of state religious policy in respect to China's Protestants.

Even officials of the China Christian Council, the ecclesiastical structure that determines personnel and theological issues within the TSPM, have privately complained that RAB/SARA consistently interferes with ordinary church work. RAB/SARA officials at the provincial level, for example, sometimes arbitrarily determine how many graduates of the theological colleges may actually be ordained within a specific time-frame.

The government policy on how to deal with religion in China was inherited by Hu Jintao from a top-level Communist Party conference on religion that convened in December 2001; in effect three months after the implications of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York had been digested in Beijing. Though Islam was not specifically mentioned in published reports of that conference, China's political leadership appears to have decided that any religion in China, if not strictly supervised, could turn into the regime's Achilles heel. "The Party and Government," the official *People's Daily* account of the conference said, "can only strengthen their leadership over religious work and their supervision over religious affairs. They cannot allow them to weaken." China's then Communist leader President Jiang Zeming was quoted as saying that the "gist" of supervision of religious affairs was: "Protect the legal, Wipe out the illegal, Resist infiltration and attack crime."

In fact, Jiang's speech at this December 2001 conference reiterated points previously articulated by RAB/SARA director Ye Xiaowen. Ye has said: "Following the ever-greater progress in human society, religions will more and more absorb certain secular moral values and rational elements, and leave behind their fanaticism and fervor, and gradually conform and adapt to real society." In effect, Ye seemed to be asserting the right of China's Communist and state authorities to force religious thought into a mold compatible with the official socialist and secular worldview of China's ruling Communist Party. That

approach seems to have been continued during the administration of Hu Jintao. For example, efforts to force Protestant Christianity to "absorb certain secular moral values" have been underway for nearly half a decade at the Jinling Theological Seminary in Nanjing, the national seminary of China's officially recognized Protestantism. Under the direction of China's most prominent Protestant leader, Bishop Ding Guangxun, former head of both the TSPM and the China Christian Council and still, in his late 80's, president of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, teachers and students at the seminary have been subjected to a campaign to impose upon them a "theology of reconstruction." In essence, this "theology" is a repudiation of the conservative evangelical viewpoint of the overwhelming majority of China's Christians. Efforts to thrust this new theology down the throats of pastors, officials, teachers, and seminary students associated with the China Christian Council appears to many a throwback to the ugly, coercive political campaigns orchestrated by Chairman Mao Zedong in the 1950's. At that time Bishop Ding was a leader in efforts to humiliate in the public media all Protestant Christians who were unwilling to be associated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

The actual implementation of policies to control religious expression at China's grass-roots has certainly been deeply affected by the campaign to eliminate the meditation group Falungong. It is unfortunate that the unusual teachings of Falungong, and in particular the near-divine status attributed to the group's founder, Li Hongzhi, now resident in the U.S., have deflected what might have been popular disapproval among Chinese of the brutal methods used against Falungong practitioners. The vast majority of ordinary Chinese, including Chinese Christians, believe that Falungong is indeed an anti-social cult with potentially dangerous implications. However mistaken or unfair such apprehensions of Falungong may be, they have had two results: a broad disapproval of Falungong among most Chinese, and an energized suppression of all religious groups with even the remotest possibility of being called a "cult." An indirect consequence has been an intense suspicion by the authorities of any Chinese politically opposed to the government who also have strong religious convictions.

In May 2003, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its annual report that there had been a "deterioration of protections for religious freedom in China." It went on: "The Chinese government commits numerous egregious violations against members of many of China's religious and spiritual communities, including Evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and other groups, such as the Falun Gong, that the government has labeled 'evil cults.'"

To itemize just a few of the "ordinary" harassment of China's Protestant and Catholic Christians in the past several months, here are some incidents:

July 1, 2003 - Authorities arrested 5 Roman Catholic clergy at Siliying in Boading, Hebei province, approximately 70 miles from Beijing. The five priests were all on their way to visit another Catholic underground priest, Fr. Lu Genjun, had had just been released from three years' imprisonment in labor camp.

June 16 - A Catholic priest, Fr. Lu Xiaozhou, was arrested in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, as he was about to administer the Sacrament of Anointing for the Sick to a dying Catholic.

June 15, 2003 - Authorities raided a house church in Liaoning province . 40 Christians were tied up and arrested. They were told their gathering had been "illegal."

June 11, 2003 - Reports from the Jingzhou prison where imprisoned South China Church leader, Gong Shengliang has been held, said that Gong had been repeatedly beaten and was passing blood and urine as a result of his injuries.

June 6, 2003 - Some 12 Christians were arrested in a raid on four homes in Yunnan province. At least eight of the twelve have been sent to re-education through labor camps. This punishment can be meted out without any court procedure up to a maximum of three years at a time.

April 4, 2003 -- 120 house church leaders from the Local Church were arrested in Henan province. Twenty were later released, leaving the remaining 100 in custody.

There are certainly other incidents for which there is insufficient space here to provide details.

Meanwhile, though the incidents do not relate directly to religious practice in China, but to their political activities, there are two very prominent cases of Chinese Christians who have been held for months without charge or trial, or at the very least held under very suspicious circumstances.

The first incident concerns a prominent Chinese physician, permanent resident of the U.S., Dr. Wang Bingzhang. Dr. Wang, who has lived in the U.S. since the early 1980's, has been active in China's fledgling democracy movement among Chinese in exile or temporarily outside China. Wang has been a leading figure in the Free China Movement, an umbrella grouping of some 30 organizations advocating democracy and human rights in China.

Wang and two Chinese traveling companions were kidnapped in broad daylight outside their hotel in the northern part of Vietnam in June 2002. Their kidnappers were men wearing Vietnamese police uniforms but speaking fluent Mandarin Chinese. Wang and his companions were taken by car to a waiting boat which then took them across the border to China. Wang was found tied up in a Buddhist temple in Yunnan province. The Chinese police asserted that he had been kidnapped by a gang that was demanding \$10 million in ransom money.

The Chinese police who supposedly came upon Wang Bingzhang and his companions providentially learned that Wang was wanted on "terrorism" charges in Shenzhen, Guangdong province. After several months of being held in Shenzhen incommunicado, during which the Chinese foreign ministry repeatedly denied having any knowledge of Wang's whereabouts, Wang's two companions were released. Wang himself was sentenced in February 2002 to life imprisonment on charges of "terrorism."

Wang was a qualified physician and a deeply committed Protestant Christian. The notion that this 55-year-old churchgoing medical professional was engaged in terrorism is as plausible as the notion that China's political authorities are willing to implement legal due process in the country.

The other case of egregious persecution of a political oppositionist of Christian faith is that of Yang Jianli. Arriving in the U.S. in 1986, Yang earned a Ph.D. in Mathematics from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in political economy from Harvard University. A winner of numerous academic and other awards, Yang was the founding president of the Foundation for China in the 21st. Century, a non-profit organization dedicated to the establishment of democracy in China. He has appeared several times to give testimony before numerous Congressional hearings on Capitol Hill. He was an eyewitness of the June 4 Tiananmen Massacre in Beijing. In June 2003, the House passed Resolution 199 condemning the fact that Yang had already been held for nearly a year without criminal charges being filed, or access to a lawyer, or any contact with his family or relatives. Finally, after nearly 15 months of incarceration, he was formally charged last week with spying for Taiwan and permitted for the very first time to see his lawyer. He was also a devout Christian and a member of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Brookline, MA.

Wang Bingzhang and Yang Jianli were certainly opposed to the current political system in China and did their best to advocate change. To that extent, there were no friends of China's Communist Party leadership. It is true that they were not specifically charged with any crime related to religious practice. But their desire to

see a more open China, a China in which freedom of conscience would be written not just in the heart yearnings of their compatriots but in the manuals of China's police authorities is one which all men and women of faith can and should support. It is my hope that the Congressional China Commission will look broadly into statements and actions that uphold the American conviction of the inviolability of freedom of conscience and religious practice.

David Aikman, Lovettsville, VA, July 24 2003